

Derek Mooney's radio show -> transcript from February 8th, 2011

Derek Mooney: Now Ireland has become a very multicultural society over the last 15 or 20 years and when we think of the alternative cultures that have flourished here, we tend to think of: the Chinese community, the Polish community, the Brazilian community even.

But there is another community of people who are born and bred in Ireland, mainly to Irish parents, but from their own, unique cultural group and their particular culture often gets overlooked as a distinct community in itself, I'm referring to the Deaf community.

And although you can't see it, I'm conscious that the word 'deaf' is spelled here with a capital 'd' on my sheet and it's spelled that way for a particular reason, which we'll get to later.

Now, 90% percent of the deaf people born in Ireland are actually born to parents who can hear perfectly, that's 90% of deaf people, so you can imagine it's a completely new and overwhelming experience for any mother or father who discovers their child is deaf and one such mother is here with me now, her name is Eithne Carroll and her son is Callum. And I know Callum isn't here with us in studio, but he's here somewhere.

Eithne Carroll: In the building! (laughing)

Derek Mooney: In the building.

Eithne Carroll: Yes.

Derek Mooney: In a moment we'll be talking to talking to Liam O'Dywer, who's the chief executive officer with the Catholic Institute of Deaf Parents. But first of all, Eithne tell me your story, when did you first discover that Callum was deaf?

Eithne Carroll: Well, Callum wasn't actually born deaf, he was born with a cleft lip and pallette, what we would have known as a hair lip, so em he developed pneumonia, he swallowed the milk directly into his lungs, developed pneumonia, didn't respond to normal antibiotics so at two days old he was transferred to Crumlin hospital here in Dublin and we were told that the medication he needed in order to fight the pneumonia, em there was a high probability it would affect his hearing to some degree, but they didn't know exactly to what degree.

So they had to give him the medication it was a no win situation, so em at about 14 month, his hearing then started to drop just on one side and it just gradually got worse and worse and worse and by the time he was about 3 years and a half he would've been classed then as profoundly deaf.

Derek Mooney: So up to 14 you think he could have..

Eithne Carroll: 14 months

Derek Mooney: 14 months old, excuse me, he could hear you?

Eithne Carroll: Yes, yes but Callum was so sick in his first year, due to his chest problems and all that sort of stuff, he didn't develop at the same rate as, and I hate using this word, but as a normal 14 month old.

Derek Mooney: In inverted commas.

Eithne Carroll: Yes, He was very slow to develop and that was because he had been so sick. You know, so em, but the diagnosis of being profoundly deaf would've been made at about 3 and a half.

Derek Mooney: And what kind of support structures were in place for you at the time?

Eithne Carroll: At that time? Nothing!

Derek Mooney: Nothing at all?

Eithne Carroll: No! I left the clinic and eh thought: 'ok, he's profoundly deaf, now what do I do?' There was no information given to me whatsoever so em I actually went online and that's where I found em the NAD, they've changed their name now, deafhear.ie, so I went up to their headquarters up in Frederick's Street here in Dublin and spoke to...told them what I wanted my child was diagnosed profoundly deaf and I didn't know where to go and em they put me in touch with the social worker there. And em I didn't think I needed a social worker, thought that they were only for dysfunctional families type thing, but anyway she was great and then they put me in touch with the office in Tullamore and if it wasn't for them now, I really would've been lost. They were, they were unbelievably good.

Derek Mooney: What did they do for you?

Eithne Carroll: Well, they gave me options, they told me about different hearing units within schools, which Callum did attend...1 for a year, down the country much closer to home and eh it just didn't work for Callum.

Derek Mooney: Where are you living, by the way?

Eithne Carroll: I'm living in Longford.

Derek Mooney: And were you there all that time?

Eithne Carroll: Yes.

Derek Mooney: So he's 8 now, isn't he?

Eithne Carroll: Yes

Derek Mooney: He's 8 years old. So I mean did he go to a, and I hate to use the term as well, inverted commas, normal school?

Eithne Carroll: Well, he went to a national school, that had a hearing unit within the national school and it just did not work. Without going into too much detail, it just wasn't,

he wasn't happy and I felt he could learn an awful lot more, I thought their had to have been something more there to teach him, to enable him to be educated to his full potential, I reckon there had to have been something more.

So I went online at that stage and em I came across St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys in Cabra and came up twice and had a look at it and then we brought Callum up and he had a look at it and we decided to enroll him there. So he's now in his 4th year there and within a week, that child, it was like a light went on, his whole world opened up, he was no longer isolated, the kids his own age were signing, his teachers, the assistants, everybody...do you know because Callum has no speech, Callum only uses ISL, which is Irish Sign Language, so all of a sudden everybody in his school is using ISL, so he is no longer isolated, he's no longer on the verge, he's part of it.

And the other thing is it's not only about education, Callum is deaf, ok? Now, until such time as Callum can communicate with hearing people or hearing people can communicate with him; he's never going to be incorporated fully into the hearing community, so he has to have a community which for him is the Deaf Community. It's like, Derek, if I said to you, if I started to speak to you in French.

Derek Mooney: Yeah.

Eithne Carroll: You wouldn't have a clue what I was saying!

Derek Mooney: No, I wouldn't!

Eithne Carroll: No! And you wouldn't be able to communicate back!

Derek Mooney: I'd be lost!

Eithne Carroll: Now, you could talk to Callum and he can lip-read or even when he'll be older, he'll be able to lip-read more, but he may be able to understand what you are saying to him, but you're not going to understand what he is saying back to you. So, he can never be fully incorporated into the hearing community, until such time, as people in the hearing community can communicate with him, which is ISL, Irish Sign language.

Derek Mooney: So was the school that he was in, it was a primary school right?

Eithne Carroll: It was a national school.

Derek Mooney: A national school, excuse me! And you'll have to excuse my ignorance here, because you said they had a deaf unit?

Eithne Carroll: There was a hearing unit in the school: a teacher with kids that are hard of hearing, now Callum was profoundly deaf and that teacher teaches them within the unit.

Derek Mooney: So what does he or she teach them? Is it sign language?

Eithne Carroll: Sign language, well all the kids were oral, except Callum, they all could speak, except Callum ... and sign language yes, but em you know...I don't want to step on toes here because I didn't have a nice time of it, basically with his year in the unit.

Derek Mooney: Ok, well it just didn't ...

Eithne Carroll: It just did not work! You know, I knew he could learn more, do you know?

Derek Mooney: Right!

Eithne Carroll: And I knew that if I left him there, it would be easier for me if I left him in the unit in longford, but I knew that he wouldn't be educated to his full potential!

Derek Mooney: Right! I hear what you're saying very clearly. So, you took him to St. Joseph's in Cabra and was life...did life change dramatically? You said that in one week...I mean what was the change in him, and what was the change in your family and up to that, were you able to communicate with him, was he able to communicate with you? What was the story?

Eithne Carroll: Oh, yes! As a family we were able to communicate, we were using ISL and again we were getting help from deafhear.ie to do that, and we were getting em what do you call it...tuition through the Department of Education which was great, em but in Callum himself, within a week, his confidence just went sky-high... sky-high, he was more outgoing, I mean we were very lucky with Callum, in that he is an outgoing child, therefore he never got frustrated in trying to communicate with us when he was smaller, he always had the patience to communicate with us, which was great be it go to get a book out and show me something in the book that he wanted but as soon as he started in St. Joseph's, he wasn't isolated anymore, you know it's as if "I'm not the only one that's deaf, i'm not the only one that needs to use sign to communicate", because where he was that really was what was happening you know. And It would be like you moving to France, not having a word of French and trying to get into a social scene and find out what's going on, it's very hard..

Derek Mooney: So that's why we say capital 'D'-e-a-f, you know, because it is a Deaf Community!

Eithne Carroll: Yes!

Derek Mooney: And how important is that community for your family now?

Eithne Carroll: Well, it is going to be Callum's community, you know and as a hearing person, I honestly don't think I'll ever be incorporated fully into the deaf community, as Callum will never be fully incorporated into the hearing community, but that community is going to be Callum's community and therefore I have to do whatever it takes to get him incorporated into that. And if I kept him in Longford, that would not happen... he'd neither be part of the hearing community and he'd neither be part of the deaf community.

Derek Mooney: Now, you said St. Joseph's is in Cabra, as it is, and you're in Longford, kids go to school every day...

Eithne Carroll: Yes.

Derek Mooney: Do you drive up and down every day?

Eithne Carroll: Yes!

Derek Mooney: So what time do you have to leave in the morning? What time do you collect him in the evening? (laughing) My God!

Eithne Carroll: (laughing) Well, I get up at 6:30 and get the lunches ready and get the rest of them out to school and then we toddle off and we get him up for about 9 and then he finishes at about 2:45 and then i go down home and collect the others and it's grand.

Derek Mooney: You're a mammy!

Eithne Carroll: Yes and that's what mummies do!

Derek Mooney: As Mrs. Browne would say.

Eithne Carroll: You do what needs to be done and get on with it, basically!

Derek Mooney: And you want the best for him and you think this is the best!

Eithne Carroll: Yes, oh without a shadow of a doubt! I mean I know if I didn't have Cabra, if he was not being educated in Dublin, at the end of the day when he's 19, 20 ... he would be totally dependent on the state and me, whereas at the end of the day, my goal for Callum is for him to be out, totally independent, living a totally independent life, without needing to hang on to me and I really feel that he can only do that by being educated in the deaf school, where people know what they're doing and they know how to educate them and how to bring them into the culture of the Deaf Community. I mean, I'm a hearing person, what do I know about the Deaf Community? I know nothing! So Callum has to be educated by people that know what they're doing. Simple as.

Derek Mooney: So you don't think that mainstream schools should perhaps introduce Irish Sign Language?

Eithne Carroll: It would be great, it would be great if ISL was brought into all schools, but right now it's not practical for.. I'm assuming from a Department of Education's view point. But you know, if they do that, great, but right now that's too late for Callum! Do you know, so if that happens down the road absolutely it'd be great.

Derek Mooney: And I presume you would like it if there would be something like a St. Joseph's school nearer to home?

Eithne Carroll: Oh, absolutely!

Derek Mooney: So that when he comes home in the evening, he still has his friends around him! Or are there lots of kids from all over the country, as I said excuse my ignorance, coming to St. Joseph's?

Eithne Carroll: Yes there is, yeah, em...

Derek Mooney: So they're all split up! So in the evening, when he comes home who does he play with?

Eithne Carroll: He plays with his brothers and his mammy, you know..he still has lots of cousins

Derek Mooney: But you said he was isolated in National School! Is he still a little bit isolated when he comes home from school, in the evenings?

Eithne Carroll: Well, yes, but then if you think about it, in the winter time, my hearing kids are as well, because we live in the country and their friends are a mile up the road so in the winter time, they're not out in the snow, they're not out in the rain, so they only see them in school, anyway, as it is, and texting and things like that in the evenings! In summer time, when I suppose that's the time when he'd miss his friends more, when they're out playing in the green and all that sort of things...em but then he has a lot of cousins around so he plays with them and he's happy out!

Derek Mooney: And can all of your family sign?

Eithne Carroll: We're learning! you know,It's a slow process, we are learning, but it's like a whole new language! It's em, Because, it's not Signed English!

Derek Mooney: No, and I was going to say, as i understand it, it's a bit like Gaelic, i mean it's a distinct language; into its own, irish sign language is different to english sign language is different to American sign language and different then to european sign language. Why is there not one protocol that has everybody doing the same thing at the same time, meaning the same thing?

Eithne Carroll: Well, then why doesn't everybody in the whole world speak English?

Derek Mooney: I agree with you totally!

Eithne Carroll: You know, but em...

Derek Mooney: That's the way it is!

Eithne Carroll: That's as is! Yeah!

Derek Mooney: Eh Liam, thank you very much indeed for coming in also! You're chief executive with the Catholic Institute of Deaf Parents ... can you explain to me and the people listening and hearing this possibly for the first time, exactly what Irish Sign Language is and how it differs from english sign language and american sign language and everything else?

Liam O'Dwyer: I'm glad you left the simple question to me! (laughing)

Derek Mooney: (laughing) Yeah...

Liam O'Dwyer: It's just that it is a complete language which has ultimately evolved over a number of years and it's different in the sense that I suppose people in France would have French sign language and people in America have American sign language, so they are all different ultimately and they have just evolved in their own communities.

There is an international language though, so when you go to a conference and there are, you know, two or three hundred people from all over the world all signing their own sign language, there is an international version, which they are able to pick up, because many of the signs are quite similar. And it's the same way with Dutch, I have some experience with Dutch, you know English is a big help with Dutch, because some of those words cross very well.

Derek Mooney: And I'm told that English sign language has a lot more spelling to be done with the hands, whereas Irish Sign Language is more symbolic. Is that true?

Liam O'Dwyer: Yeah, yeah it is, it's very symbolic, in fact a lot of it too, the facial expression will be very important, so it's not just a sign with hands, it's much more than that! A lot is communicated by the expression that someone uses when they're actually signing!

Derek Mooney: Now you're dealing with families and people who are deaf and friends and extended families, so what's the normal reaction when they discover that a child is born deaf?

Liam O'Dwyer: Oh, well it's a huge shock to a family, because em most parents, a vast bulk of the parents would be hearing parents and they would never have dreamt that their child was going to be deaf so it's an enormous shock and then, I think what is critical at that stage is just you know, what we heard earlier, information is required, parents need immediate access to information, about what's there for their child, what's there for their child in terms of medical interventions, because there are possibilities, in terms of education interventions and then the critical one, in term of the ... socially: where is their child going to be not just in two years or five years or ten years, but ultimately when their child is into their twenties and that's what we think is missing! Because there's ..so often parents are coming to us saying 'A., we didn't know that St. Mary's and St. Joseph's schools, they're the specialist schools and indeed there's one in Limerick so there are 3 specialist schools for deaf children

Derek Mooney: So 1, 2 schools in Dublin?

Liam O'Dwyer: Two in Dublin, St Mary's for girls and St Joseph's in Cabra, they are both in Cabra and then there's a school in Limerick as well, em specifically for deaf children and so at those schools what you've got is that you got expertise, which really is not available outside of those school! So what we would like to see is clearer information going to parents about education, about the types of interventions that are there. Holland is a great example of it, of course, they have a system whereby that as soon as someone is identified immediately the parents are brought to one center and at that center then they are put in touch with all of the different professions that can add something.

Derek Mooney: Yeah, that's the Dutch for you, they are very pragmatic!

Liam O'Dwyer: Well they are, they're pragmatic, they're organised!

Derek Mooney: They just get on with it!

Liam O'Dwyer: Exactly and then they work out a plan with the parents and they give what they call, their usual way 'a backpack' to the child, so that the child takes that then to whatever school the parent wants the child to go to!

Derek Mooney: Talk to me about the new policy in relation to the education of deaf children.

Liam O'Dwyer: Well we, I suppose together with a number of other deaf organizations, we launched a policy last year and we're trying obviously to influence the department of education into implementing that policy at the moment and the critical parts of it would be: number one, to have that information available, to have reliable information available and then secondly and I think it's important that people understand that bilingualism is an important aspect in relation to deaf children, because many parents get advice ... forget about sign language! Try to get your child to speak and if the child really has the potential to speak, has the capacity to speak, of course you go after that!. That is the most important thing, but for cognitive development the child will also need to learn to sign, because so often children are simply left and told 'Speak! Now is your chance to speak', whereas in fact they need both: they need English, be it written English or oral English and they equally need sign and that can only benefit the child. And, I think that some of the medical advice that we've had in the past was 'Don't teach your child to sign, because that will make your child lazy, your child will not actually not try to speak!'. That's nonsense! What we need to be doing is to ensuring, like for instance the Dutch do that they speak English and Dutch as well, so you learn to sign...

Derek Mooney: With such great ease aswell, and slip from one into the other...

Liam O'Dwyer: Exactly and that means that the child can be part of a hearing community and be part of the deaf community, which is critical for the future of any child!

Derek Mooney: Well Liam, thank you very much indeed and Eithne thank you for coming in and telling us your story aswell! Our number is 1850715900 or visit our website and you can find more details about deafhear.ie, on our website: rte.ie/mooney.